

BLOSSOMING HOPE



A SILVER
LINING SERIES
BOOK - 2



LANE ANDERSON

Blossoming Hope

A Silver Lining Series
Book 2

Lane Anderson



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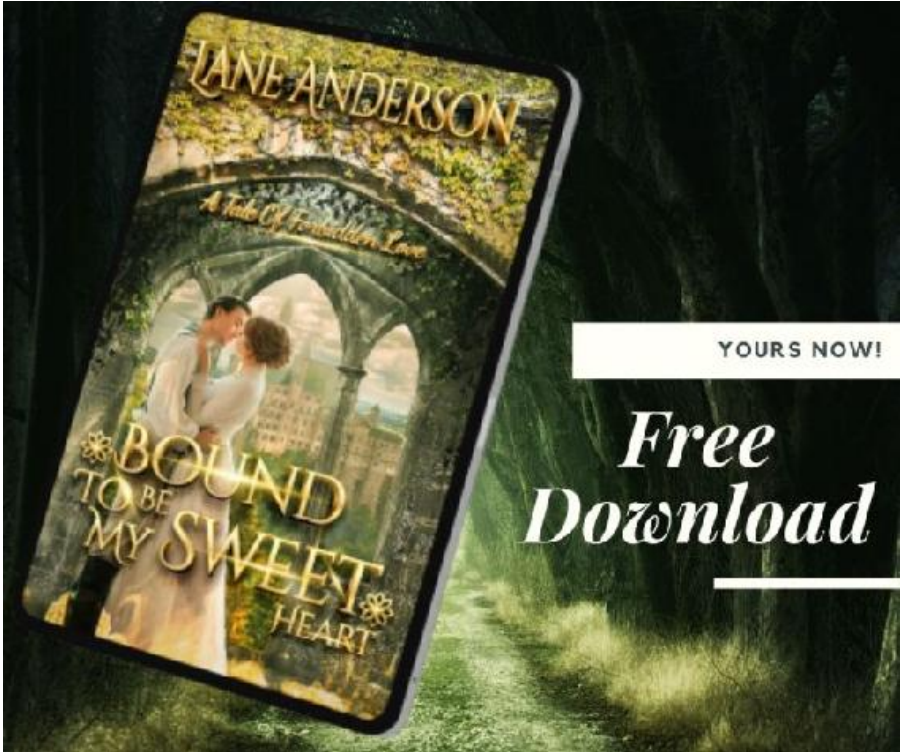
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A Special Gift For You!

I wanted to give you a special gift just for joining me in this adventure to the past. Having you by my side is an essential component in this journey of conquering all my dreams as an author. I don't take you for granted, and I greatly appreciate your presence! So to say thank you, I am gifting you a Free Copy of "**Bound to be my Sweetheart!**" Get your free copy by clicking the image below or [clicking here!](#)



Kind Regards,
[Lane Anderson](#)

Contents

Title Page

Copyright

A Special Gift For You!

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Leave A Review

Join ARC Team

Blossoming Hope Book 3

Other Books by Lane Anderson

Chapter One

Columbus, Ohio

1918



Hope sat by the window sill; memories of Diane's birthday dinner flashed before her eyes. She had not expected to be back in Eric's house after that night. And it bothered her more that Eric had left Anna to run after her. Why did he do that? A few seconds before he noticed her presence, he was about to commit himself to a relationship with Anna. What made him stop?

She could not deny there was some connection between them, but at the same time, she thought it was just one-sided. Eric was only successful with one thing, and that was putting her in a state of total confusion.

"Eric, why is that girl still here?" She heard Diane yell from the hallway.

Hope immediately stood and walked to the door. If she were to be dismissed, she'd rather know beforehand. She leaned with her right side on the door, placing all of her weight on it, positioning her ear in a way so she could get the whole conversation without missing anything.

Hope could hear Eric's sigh.

"Mother, the kids are taking a nap at the moment. Remember, you wouldn't want them to remain awake," Eric told her in one breath. He knew this wasn't going to change anything she had on her mind to say. He was also sure she stayed here just to pester poor Hope. Shameless, right? That was Diane Burnett for you.

Hope turned and leaned fully on the door and began to slide until she hit the bottom. She thought of ways to return the money Eric spent on her mother's treatment, but nothing seemed to come to mind. She wasn't qualified for an office job and didn't think she could handle anything outside the kitchen either. She wasn't going to stop searching though. Her name is Hope, and of course, it had seen her through a lot of things. But this is going to be the toughest; it definitely was.

Eric paced around in his office. It was a workday, but since his feelings were all over the place, he called in sick. His mother tried to convince him to quit his job once again as she didn't see the difference it made. His excuse for keeping the job a few months back would have been that he felt alone and had not healed from Elaine's death. But that wasn't the case now. Hope made him realize how important his

children are to him and his mother did her part too by bringing Anna back into the picture. It was never a dull moment with her for sure. But that's not what he wanted. Was it?

There was a light knock on the door, and it pulled Eric out of his thoughts immediately. He weaved his way back to his chair, sat in it, and pulled it towards his new mahogany office desk. Although he insisted he didn't need one, Anna found it thoughtful to get him a gift. She remembered he had always fantasized about fine mahogany wood.

With his left hand on his chin and a pen in his right, he tapped the desk, making light marks on it as he did so. Whoever was on the other side of the door would have to come back later. He wasn't in the mood for conversations, especially if it involved the two women living under his roof at the moment.

Just as he was mentally dismissing the person, the knock came again. This time a bit louder than before.

"This had better be important." He muttered beneath his breath.

"Eric, are you in there?" A voice he recognized as Anna's asked from outside.

He sighed. His stomach did a full somersault and grumbled as if he hadn't had anything to eat the whole day. This was quite contrary to the fact that he had eaten two bowlfuls of the chicken soup Hope had made earlier.

"Eric, it's me, Anna. Are you in there?" Anna called out again. She tried the handle of the door, and it didn't open. It was then he remembered that while he was deep in thought earlier, he locked the door.

She knew he said he wasn't going to the bank today, and he wasn't in his bedroom either. Her heart began to race at the thought that something terrible might have happened to him. Just as she was about to turn on her heels and head to Diane's room to make a report, she heard his voice.

"Anna?" He asked to confirm as though he didn't know she was the one behind the door.

"Yes, It's I. I thought to check up on you since I hadn't heard from you all day. Your mother is worried too." She said and leaned on the door.

Eric stood up, walked to the door, and unlocked it. Maybe it wasn't such a bad idea that she was here anyway.

As he opened the door, she rushed in and engulfed him in a hug.

Eric was not sure of how to act initially. Probably, because he had another woman on his mind, he could not bear to see Anna like this either, and so he wrapped his arms around her.

"Is there something wrong?" He asked her as he pulled himself out

of the embrace and studied her face. She looked like she had been crying for hours. He began to feel guilty as if he was the cause for her tears. Well, technically, it was. If his feelings weren't so scattered, he would be able to commit himself to her once and for all.

She began to sob lightly and leaned back on his chest. "Come on, Anna. Talk to me," he urged on. Maybe, just maybe, this wasn't about his conflicting reaction to last night's event. Perhaps she had something else on her mind.

"I feel like I'm losing you, Eric," she said. "I don't know why, but as each day passes by and I see you put all your attention on that Nanny, it riles me up." She confessed. Eric was aware that he did stare at Hope a lot, but he never thought anyone apart from his mother noticed.

He didn't know what to say. He held her and waited for her to say something else, but she didn't speak up either. The silence is what he didn't enjoy, and he was sure she didn't want that. She needed words of assurance, and that was pretty impossible at the current moment.

Just a little time, Anna. It's only going to be a while. Just a little time, please. Everything is eventually going to fall into place.

Why this summer afternoon looked misty was a mystery Hope was determined to unravel. Mist in the morning would have been explainable, but on a summer afternoon? Maybe that was a sign that she should turn back and accept the fact that she would be living with Eric until she could pay off her debt and might have to take care of the children he would have with Anna as well. A man like Eric was far from her reach, and she knew it. It didn't stop her from yearning to be near him.

She had made up her mind to go job hunting. She almost decided totally against it; after she stepped into Eric's office earlier, she knew she had to go. Although she was not the maid, Anna had requested that she bring two cups of coffee to Eric's office. Hope did not have a choice but to oblige as she did not want any further issues with Diane or Anna herself. Her mother's wellbeing depends on all of them in a way. Seeing them in the position they were in made her feel—jealous? That was new to her.

She further embarrassed herself by dropping the tray on the floor, which made Anna furious. The Hope she knew wasn't this clumsy. Hope was never clumsy, as a matter of fact. 'Get your act together,' she advised herself as she picked up the pieces of the fine Chinaware she had mistakenly broken. She could feel Eric's eyes and could hear his voice as he told her to drop the tray, but she wouldn't. She apologized genuinely for the mess and asked for permission to be out of the house for a while.

Hope shuddered inside her coat. Eric had asked Charles to give her a ride, but she turned down such a notion. Her mission out of the house was complex. Although she knew she was running late, she couldn't afford to take Charles with her because he might have to give account to Eric upon their return.

"Barter's Pot," the sign read. It looked better than ever. The rumors going around didn't lie. She heard a lot about it the last time she went to visit her mother. Mrs. Barter had done major renovations and called for her to come back to work.

They had a massive increase in clientele since the renovations, but the difference in the taste of the chicken soup could be easily spotted. It wasn't the same without Hope, Mrs. Barter had to admit.

When she called Hope weeks ago, she never imagined Hope would show due to the perks of her new job. Mrs. Barter was ready to pay her more than Mr. Burnett was offering; in addition, she got to take food home to her mother as usual. The ball was in her court. She had a choice to make as she walked into the restaurant; she knew the path she had to take for her good.

The smell of good buns hit her nose as she realized just how much she missed cooking. Sadly, the only meal she was allowed to prepare in Mr. Burnett's house was chicken soup.

Celine was the first person to catch wind of her presence. "Hope!" She screamed from behind the counter while the customer she attended looked irritated at her diverted attention. She fixed that immediately as she whispered something to him. His face lit up with recognition. Hope felt she knew him from somewhere too.

He walked up to her, and as he did, she took in his features. She would have had a detailed description of what he looked like, but all that she could take in was his looks didn't compare to those of Eric.

"Hope," Mrs. Barter called from her office door. Celine's outburst must have made her aware of her presence.

Hope turned in the direction of the voice and walked towards her, displaying a huge smile that could melt ice.

"Come here, child," Mrs. Barter said and enveloped her in a hug. Hope immediately felt the need to see her mother. Just a hug from Mrs. Barter made half of her worries go away.

"Ready to have your job back?" She asked Hope.

"Never been more ready for anything in my life," Hope replied.

One more obstacle to overcome—Eric.

He slammed his fist on the desk, alongside the letter.

"No. And that's final," he said.

Hope could not believe her ears. She was doing both of them a

favor by quitting, but it only seemed to infuriate Eric.

"If it's a raise you want, I'll give it to you," he said and shredded the appointment letter Mrs. Barter had just handed to her.

"\$100 doesn't sound bad, right? So be it." He said as he signed a sheet of paper he drew out from his desk drawer. "There you have it. You can return to your work."

Chapter Two



"Hope dear," Joanne called out to Hope as she chopped the last chunks of carrot to be put into the soup.

"I'll be there in a few," Hope replied. She had no idea why Diane would demand that she make soup since she seemed not to like anything Hope did, said, or cooked, for that matter. Joanne offered to lend her a helping hand since she was a bit occupied with the children.

"Mrs. Diane would love to speak with you," Joanne said as Hope walked into the kitchen. She wiped her hands on the apron before she untied it and ran up to the door of the chamber-like room that Diane occupied.

She knocked on the door of the room. It swung open like it had not been adequately closed earlier on.

"Come in," Diane said from inside.

Hope intended to clean her shoes before she walked into the room. She didn't want anything more to put her on the woman's bad side.

"How do you do today, Ma'am?" Hope curtsied and asked.

Diane laughed. The kind of evil laugh witches gives when they are up to no good. "I happen to be the happiest person alive, Hope. The happiest," she relayed. Why she was excited, Hope had no idea. It wasn't her birthday for sure; that went by a few weeks ago. To the best of her knowledge, nothing outstanding had happened to make her so excited. But either way, Hope was happy she was in a good mood and not picking on her.

Diane cleared her throat, bringing Hope back to the realization that she was still in Diane's room. "How's the soup coming?" She asked.

"It should be ready in less than an hour," Hope replied.

Diane was stunned. It was clear that she wasn't expecting that reply. Maybe she asked Hope to prepare the soup so that she gets so swamped with work. But with Joanne's help, she was able to scale through.

"I believe the children are well attended to as well?" Diane questioned.

Hope nodded in response; suddenly, she noticed Diane's face fold into a frown, so she quickly asserted. "Yes. I just tucked Alice into bed for a nap, and Morgan is at the piano for his lessons."

Diane nodded. Hope was coming along well, and she attributed all of that to her efforts.

"Look to the left there; you'll see the clothes piled on the chair."

Hope turned her eyes to where Diane directed. She saw identical dresses made with fine purple linen.

"Take those and share with the staff, including yourself. There are name tags on all of the dresses," she pointed to the labels on each dress. "Identify which belongs to each one of you and tell them to put it on tonight. There is going to be an in-house celebration as I have a lot to announce," she stated matter of factly.

"Yes, ma'am. I'll get right to it," Hope said and packed all the clothes neatly into her arms. "Would that be all?" She asked out of courtesy.

Diane thought for a while before she said, "Yes, that would be all for now. Make sure the soup comes out perfect."

Hope curtsied even with the clothes in her arms and said, "I will do just that. Excuse me, ma'am."

The night came fast, faster than she could ever remember. Hope was by the piano with Morgan when Eric returned home from work, but she hadn't said anything more than hello to him.

It was evident that she didn't want to be there. Eric knew it wasn't making her happy, but he couldn't bear for her to be far from him. He was showing her gratitude; he tried to convince himself. He felt grateful; she was the reason he was able to mend his relationship with his children. Subsequently, the iced heart he developed after Elaine died had thawed. It was only because of her that he was able to achieve these things and much more. Not forgetting the fact that she helped him retain his job. The name Hope truly befitted her personality. She did bring light when all that seemed to exist was darkness.

Eric knew he shouldn't be having such thoughts running through his mind as he was about to ask Anna to marry him. He unwittingly confided in his mother and left everything for her to plan.

He was also surprised at how discreetly she carried out the whole plan. It worked out just as he expected. Well, all except for the ridiculous dresses the staff had on. He knew the culprit behind such antics; this had Diane's name written all over it.

Eric scanned the dining room for all his staff. Leaning by one of the pillars was the one he was searching for, looking as uninterested as ever. Indubitably, it was Hope. The dress hugged her petite frame tightly as a pendant hung from her neck made her even more enchanting. The only thing that felt out of place was the puffed sleeves. Eric knew fully well that Diane did that on purpose.

She shifted her gaze from her nails which she had been dutifully picking since Eric—unknown to her—started watching her. As she

lifted her head, the first person her eyes came in contact with was Eric; he was staring right back at her.

The fact that he held his gaze for an uncomfortable amount of time and still didn't look away bothered her. His green eyes searched through hers like he wanted answers to questions he hadn't voiced yet.

Gasps from the dining hall broke the contact as Hope was the first to look away. Anna came down the stairs in a big flowing gown. It was prettier than anything Hope had seen in her life and even more expensive than anything she'd ever get to wear.

Eric stood to his feet; his mouth hung open in awe of the beauty that stood ahead of him. His mother had gone to great lengths to ensure that his bride-to-be was nothing but perfect.

He walked to the foot of the stairs as Anna stretched her right hand towards him. He took it in his, placed a light kiss on it, and spun her around gently.

"You look absolutely stunning, Anna. Beautiful as always," Eric said. He was being honest; he had not seen Anna looking this elegant before.

"Thank you, Eric," she voiced. "You don't look so bad yourself."

"So bad?" Eric scoffed. "I don't look bad at all." To give him a little credit, the tuxedo was a perfect fit for him.

Diane cleared her throat, drawing their attention back to her and the rest of the people standing in the hall.

"Right. Thank you too, Diane," Anna said, and Diane burst out laughing.

"Nonsense, my dear." She said. "You know you're like a daughter to me. As a matter of fact, you are a daughter to me already." Diane smiled.

Anna smiled back at her before she took Eric's hands in hers and led them to the table, where everyone sat. The staff wasn't left out as Diane made sure there were chairs for everyone.

'No one is unimportant; invite everyone. Ensure every member of the staff is there and are all properly dressed,' she said to Joanne earlier.

There was little chatter in the room. Everyone had their ideas as to why Diane invited them for dinner this night.

Eric picked a spoon and used it to clink on the glass that was beside him.

"Silence everyone," he said gently to avoid sounding so rude and domineering. It was a beautiful night, and he was going to enjoy it to the latter. "Now, I know my mother invited you all here with the idea that she was going to give a special announcement this evening. Which is true to an extent," he said and exhaled. "Yes, there is a major announcement to be made, but not by my mother. It's by me. It

concerns this family and the house at large. I believe that is why my mother insisted you all should be here with us this evening." Eric finished and pushed the chair he sat on before he stood.

"This is the announcement. Or rather, my proposal.

Dear Hope Duncan, would you do me the honor of taking this ring and being my wife?"

"Hopppeeee!" Hope heard a shrill cry undoubtedly coming from Morgan's room.

She turned to her side and checked the time. It was already thirty minutes past seven. She figured she must have slept for long for the entire dream to have played out like that. It would have been lovely if she had gotten to the point where they got married. She wanted to know how that would feel. But it was only a dream, a lovely dream but still a dream nevertheless.

"Hope!" Morgan cried out again. This time, she could hear the pain in his voice.

She heard the door to another room open and immediately scrambled from bed. She'd be ruined if Anna or Diane got to Morgan first. They'd give Eric every reason why she should no longer be there. As much as she would love that to happen, she was also considering the fact that the children had grown on her, and she couldn't bear to be away from them for too long.

She flung the door to her room open and cursed under her breath when she saw that the door to his room was already open.

"I want to show it to Hope," Morgan cried. That only meant one thing. Anna was in the room.

"But sweetie, you can show me too. I could be of help to you," Anna tried to soothe the child, much to Morgan's discontent. Since her arrival, he hadn't shown any signs of liking her, neither had Alice.

Hope walked to the door and leaned on it. She wanted to give Anna a little time to see if Morgan would eventually give in to her request. After a few minutes, she walked into the room when he saw that she was headed nowhere.

"Hope," Morgan said as he rose from the bed. He walked towards her, and Hope bent down to greet him. Morgan walked right into her spread arms and put his head on her shoulders. His cries from earlier had reduced to muffled sobs.

Anna stood by Morgan's bed, eyeing Hope as she attended to Morgan. Nothing made her angrier than the fact that Hope was trying to take her place in Eric's family. No, she wasn't going to let that happen. A conversation with Eric would go a long way, she believed.

"Oh, now that's okay," Hope told Morgan. "You see, you don't have to make a big fuss. Injuries come and go, but my love will remain forever," she stated as she kissed his sore finger. Apparently, he

injured his thumb as a night terror suddenly awakened him.

Morgan used his sleeves to wipe the semi-dried tears off his face. "Okay," he responded. "I love you, Hope," he said and hugged her.

"Anytime, kid," she replied and rubbed his back. "Want to play a game?"

He nodded. On a typical day, she would have corrected him by telling him to change that nod to a word reply, but she didn't want to have to dampen his mood any further.

A pissed Anna stormed into Eric's office. She could not believe what had transpired earlier. If she was going to marry Eric, his children had to get used to her presence.

The only visible barrier to that was Hope. In such a short time, Morgan and Alice had grown so fond of Hope it was challenging to separate them from her. Anna hated that.

She hated the fact that she had to struggle for Eric's attention with her and his children's too. It was time she voiced her feelings about this to Eric. Hope had to go.

Eric looked up from the papers on his desk. From the way he was dressed, it was apparent he was ready to leave for work already. But Anna wasn't leaving this conversation for later.

"I don't like the way things are going around here, Eric," she said.

"Oh, and a good morning to you too, Anna," Eric said and looked back at the papers. He knew there was no way to avoid whatever Anna had to say, so he kept quiet so she wouldn't waste any more time.

"Hope needs to go," she stated, leaving no room for argument.

"Excuse me?" Eric said. Anna was dear to his heart, but that didn't give her the right to make decisions about his household.

"I said, Hope has to go," she repeated. Eric did not understand where this was coming from. To the best of his knowledge, there had not been any form of quarrel or conflict between them. "You see, Eric, you know I'm trying my best here to rebuild my relationship with you and also establish a good relationship with your children. But with Hope here, I don't see that happening anytime soon. Your children are so attached to her."

Eric sighed. He had expected this to be a topic of conversation much earlier. "Anna, as much as I'd love for you to get close to the children, they need Hope. I know with time, they'd warm up to you. But for now, let her be, okay? They need her, Anna." Eric said.

"But I can step in and take care of them," Anna argued.

"As their nanny?" Eric asked. "We both know you don't want to do that, so just let it be. Everything will eventually fall into place."

That was not the end of this discussion as far as Anna was

concerned. Hope had to go, and she was going to make sure that it happened.

Chapter Three



It pleased Hope as she woke up to see that the sun was high in the sky, shining brighter than she could remember. The birds didn't fail to grace the sky with their presence; their sweet melodies rang through the air. It was Hope's description of the perfect summer morning. Her mood this morning could also be attributed to the fact that it was her day off, and as such, she was going to see her mother. She missed her terribly, but at the moment, all she could do was wait until she paid off her debt to Mr. Burnett.

She hurriedly took her bath and dressed up. She didn't want to waste a second of the only free day she had. She didn't fail to greet Alice and Morgan in their rooms, where she met Joanne trying to put them in order.

"Will you be gone for long?" Joanne asked her.

"Yes," Hope replied. "I will be spending the day with my mother. Since Mr. Burnett gave me a raise about a month ago, I have been able to save a reasonable amount of money, and today, I'm going to take my mother out on a date." Hope expressed with tears in her eyes. Her mother had been through a lot and deserved the best treatment anyone could get, and she was going to make sure that she felt like the luckiest mother alive.

"That's very sweet of you, child," Joanne replied. "I wish a lot of children knew how to appreciate their parents the way you do. I'm proud of you."

"Thanks, Joanne. I'm delighted I can do all this for my mother while she's still here with me." Hope said sadly.

"That's nonsense, child." Joanne brushed her off. "With the topnotch treatment she received courtesy of Mr. Burnett, she sure is going to be standing for a long time. Trust me."

"If you say so, Joanne. I'd better be on my way now; I don't want Charles complaining about my tardiness today. Farewell for now!" She said and kissed Joanne on both cheeks.

As she stepped out of Morgan's room, a pair of green eyes greeted her. For a split second, she thought about running past him, not saying a word, but her better judgment decided against all of that.

She walked towards the end of the hallway where he stood; she stopped directly in front of him. She dropped the bag she held in her hands on the floor beside her and curtsayed.

"Good morning, Mr. Burnett," she greeted.

"Good morning, Hope. I've told you many times you can stop

calling me Mr. Burnett already. You may call me Eric," he indicated. From the look on her face, he could tell she was uncomfortable and wished to flee from his presence immediately. Eric sighed. He never meant to put her in such a position.

"I see you've packed some things and are ready to leave," he said, pointing to the bag she had dropped on the floor.

She nodded. "It's just for a day, Sir." She added.

Eric nodded slightly in understanding. He knew how much she wanted to be with her mother, but he also speculated if she would run and never return if given the opportunity. He had to keep his mind open to all these possibilities hence, shortened her days of visit to her mother.

"I'll be on my way now, Mr. Burnett," Hope said and excused herself.

She exited the mansion and got into the car. Unlike other days, she didn't mind when Charles addressed her as Miss. She was just eager to get rid of whatever it was she was feeling for that man. It wasn't going to end well; she knew it wouldn't.

The ride to her mother's apartment was silent. Since the increase in her salary, she had also found it necessary to find a more appropriate dwelling for her mother to live in. And that was precisely what she did.

The drive to the apartment was relatively shorter than she remembered. It meant one thing; her mother was living on the better side of town.

Charles honked his horn to alert the kids that stood in front of the fence. It was also a white picket fence, just like the one at Mr. Burnett's mansion. But it was not as sophisticated as the ones she saw on their side of town.

"Thank you, Charles," she said and stepped out of the car.

"You're welcome, Miss," Charles replied.

The moment Charles drives away, Hope makes her way into the building.

She walked to their apartment, which was on the ground floor, and knocked fervently. There was no response. She found that strange because her mother was aged and hardly ever went out.

So there was no reason for her to exit the apartment.

When there was no response, she knocked again and proceeded to search her bag for the spare keys she had taken with her on her last visit.

Hope inserted the key into the lock, and after a few turns, it swung open.

"Hello," Hope called out.

The house was fully lit, with a cup of unfinished coffee on the

center table alongside a slice of bread. Her mother wasn't one to litter.

"Mother," she called as she walked into the bedroom. Still, there was no reply.

"Mother!" She cried out this time around as she walked into the room. The sight before her eyes broke her heart into a million and one-pieces.

Her mother laid on the floor unconscious, with her pills in her hands. 'She must have had a seizure and tried to take her medication,' Hope thought to herself.

She rushed to her side and shook her. She was breathing, which was a good sign. She just needed her to open her eyes.

Hope rose quickly from the floor and walked into the bathroom. She scooped water into a bucket and made her way back to her mother's side. As she sprinkled water on her face and Rosemary moved slightly.

"Mother," Hope called again.

Rosemary groaned. She must have been in a lot of pain for her to search for that medication once again.

Hope thought this was over; she really thought it was. But here she was, back at square one.

"She has stage three pneumonia, Hope," the doctor said.

"The treatment administered previously should have worked perfectly. I see no reason why it would fail." He said, confused.

Hope sighed. Rosemary begged her not to take her to any doctor again as she believed that her time had come for her to leave this Earth. Hope disagreed wholeheartedly. She had sacrificed a lot for her to be alive, so she didn't think it was fitting that Rosemary gave up now.

"Alright, doctor. So what do we have to do?" Hope asked. A blooming in her heart told her that she had not come to the final destination, not yet. Rosemary still had hope for a better tomorrow. She still had hope.

"You'll have to deposit half of the medical fee to the receptionist. Then you can come back tomorrow to begin treatment."

"And what if I don't get better?" Rosemary spoke up for the first time. "Would you return all the money to my daughter? Cause she's working hard to ensure I receive the best treatment. She really is," Rosemary said with tears in her eyes.

The doctor sighed. He wished at this point he could give her a guarantee that for sure she would live to the end of days after her treatment. But sadly, he was only a physician. One of the most outstanding physicians, but even still, he couldn't give such a concrete answer. He inhaled and exhaled almost immediately.

"I can't guarantee that the treatment would work, Ma'am. But with God, all things are possible."

Rosemary broke down in tears. She didn't know what else to say.

Hope also sat quietly. Many thoughts roamed through her mind. Does she ask Eric for help? He had been kind enough to help her before, but would he do that again?

No. She wouldn't go asking him for help. She didn't want to be tied to him forever. Somehow, she had to get out of this, and she needed a solution soon.

She filled the necessary medication prescribed by the doctor for her mother and left. She felt utterly awful about leaving her alone. But at the moment, she had no choice.

Back to the mansion, to wallow in her sorrow.

The entire mansion was silent when she returned. It turned out everyone had slept off already everyone, except for Charles, who was tirelessly cleaning the cars.

Hope stood for a while and chatted with him. Telling him all that transpired during the day. Of course, he felt sorry for her and offered her a hug. Hope gladly accepted it. She needed all the comfort she could get at the moment.

"Hello," a voice behind them made them jump apart immediately. Standing before them was a replica of Diane. Hope wasn't surprised. She did hear a lot of great chatter about Eric's sister. From her looks to her personality. She stood before them right now, and Hope knew their words did no justice.

"Miss Burnett," Hope curtsied.

"No, no, Hope. We don't do that around here," she said sternly.

"Okay," Hope replied astonished. She wasn't expecting that from her at all.

"May we go in now?" Alma ushered Hope inside.

Chapter Four



This morning, breakfast took a different turn as Eric's sister, whom Hope had come to know as Alma, filled the table with lively banter.

"And how have you been, Anna?" Alma asked, reaching out to grasp Anna's hands. It had been years since they last sat at a table like this. Anna was a busy person, and Alma was as well.

The chatter died down as Diane stepped into the hall. Alma looked confused, almost like she wasn't expecting her to be there.

"Mother," she said and stood from the chair to greet her.

"Alma, my child. It's so good to know that you haven't abandoned your dear old mother," Diane said scornfully.

Alma hadn't expected any of this. When she received the letter from her brother, she thought it was just going to be something between both of them. She wasn't expecting to see her mother.

"You see, Anna," Diane started, and Alma rolled her eyes instantaneously. "Not everyone that smiles with you is a friend. Just remember that," as she gave Alma a scrutinizing grimace.

"Mother, not being in support of a union between her and Eric doesn't mean I'm not her friend. You know that is quite the opposite," Alma said in defense.

Anna was shocked. From the look on her face, Alma could tell.

"Hear me out, Anna. It's not that I don't think you and Eric will make a perfect fit. I just don't think you're what he needs at the moment. Trying to rekindle things between you forcefully would not help him in any way," Alma affirmed with conviction.

Anna could not believe her ears. When she saw Alma, she thought it would be an excellent chance for her to get Eric back to herself.

"The all-knowing Alma," Diane said through gritted teeth. "What do you presume your brother needs?"

"He needs time to heal, Mother. Time, that's what he needs." Alma replied.

Just as the atmosphere was about to get more impassioned, Eric walked into the room. A look of guilt, stress, and pain washed over him.

"Good morning, Mother," he walked to Diane and placed a kiss on her forehead.

"Good morning, Anna," he walked over to where she was seated and placed his hands on her shoulders.

Immediately after, he turned to face Alma. She stood up from the

chair and securely wrapped her arms around him.

She missed Eric so much. Much more than he could imagine. As she held him during that moment, she wished she had been there for him when he needed her the most.

Probably, he wouldn't have turned out the way he did. Maybe he wouldn't have been so angry. Perhaps he would have known how to handle his grief. Just maybe.

"How have you been?" Alma inquired.

"I told you all about it in my last letter, Alma. We'll get to talk much later. Finish up your breakfast," Eric whispered to her.

"I've finished; we can go now," Alma exclaimed.

"I can see that things are tense down here. You don't want to make things worse by moving away to talk right now, do you?"

"No, no, no," Alma said and sat back down.

When she sat down, she met the cold eyes of Diane staring at her. She silently prayed that Diane didn't bring up the topic now that Eric was here.

"So," Diane began. "A little birdie told me that your precious nanny has been fooling around with your driver."

Eric looked lost while Alma stared at Diane with her mouth wide open. She remembered seeing Hope with Charles the previous night, but he was just comforting her from what she overheard.

"Yes, Eric," Diane continued. "I did tell you that girl was an ingrate and was up to no good. I trust you can see for yourself now?" Diane said spitefully.

Alma listening to her knew that without a doubt, Diane hated Hope. However, for some reason, she knew within her that Hope was a pleasant person.

"What do you mean, Mother?" Eric equipped. "Who is this little birdie, and what did she say?" He continued. He knew for a fact that the little birdie was Anna.

"Well," Diane stopped and laughed. "She did say she saw Hope and Charles in a long embrace last night. Is that a lie?" Diane asked Hope as she walked into the room.

"What seems to be the problem, Ma'am?" Hope asked, caught completely off guard with such an accusation.

"Well, Anna here told me that from her room, she saw you in Charles' arms last night. Now, is that true, Hope?" Diane asked, thoroughly examining Hope's response.

Hope searched for words to get herself out of the situation. She knew very well it was against staff policy for members to be in relationships. Although that wasn't what it was, Diane and Anna were going to give her a hard time proving that fact.

She inhaled and said, "That isn't a lie, Ma'am."

"Aha!" Diane exclaimed.

Anna scoffed too. The person Eric had his attention on was interested in someone much lower than his standing. The irony of life.

Alma was amazed. She was slowly catching on to what was transpiring. Eric was in love with the nanny. That explained his distress call. He loved Hope and Diane was here to make sure that he ended up with Anna instead.

She didn't understand why she did what she did next, but she knew she had to save Hope somehow.

"I was there," Alma pronounced as she leaned forward to place both of her elbows on the table.

Hope turned to look at her, worried about what she was going to say next. "It's certainly not what you're thinking, brother."

Eric took his seat at the head of the table, in-between Alma and Anna, directly opposite Diane.

"Hope said something about her mother; to the best of my knowledge, Charles was just comforting her. That was it. I don't know what Mother and Anna are insinuating, but there was certainly nothing it. I overheard their entire conversation," Alma proclaimed.

Hope nodded in affirmation which made Eric smile. He felt something for Hope, still unsure of exactly what it was, but he was relieved to know she didn't have an interest in Charles.

Relief washed over the faces of both Hope and Eric as they sighed in unison, making Alma laugh hysterically. In a few seconds, Hope and Eric joined in, leaving Diane and Anna stone-faced.

On sensing the tension in the room, Hope excused herself and exited the room.

Hope laid in Alice's bed as she rocked her to sleep. Memories of the morning's event slowly faded, and only thoughts of her mother crossed her mind. Yes, the raise she received worked very well to her advantage, but that wouldn't make up for her mother's current hospital bills.

There was a slight knock on the door; Alma peeped into the room before she could answer and walked in immediately.

Hope hurriedly rose to her feet and curtsied, "Good afternoon Ma'am. How do you do?"

"How many times do I have to tell you, Hope? You don't have to be so formal with me." Alma said in response.

"Yes, Ma'am," Hope replied, her head slightly bowed.

"Enough of that nonsense. You can call me Alma, Hope," Alma corrected once again. She wasn't like this with all the servants, but she had to admit, there was something about Hope. Eric wasn't wrong. There was something about her that screamed comfort and joy.

"Alright, Miss Alma," Hope said and lifted her head for the first time since the conversation began.

Alma shook her head, but she didn't push any further. She cleared her throat and started, "If you don't mind, I overheard parts of your conversation with Charles. I'd love to know your story—all of it. That is, if you don't mind," she finished off.

Hope sighed. There was no harm in telling Alma. She proved she was harmless when she saved her at breakfast, so why not?

"Well, my name is Hope Duncan. I used to be a chef at Barter's Pot before I came to work for Mr. Burnett. I was born into a family of cooks. My father was a chef who created a delicious chicken soup recipe, and I towed in his footsteps. Nothing is interesting to know about me. I mean, I have no exciting childhood memories except the days spent with my father in the kitchen. Oh, how much I miss him, my father," Hope's word began to fade as she stared outside the window.

Alma waited for her to continue; when she didn't say anything, she urged on. "And how about your mother?"

"Oh, mother?" Hope answered and twitched her eyes a bit. She wasn't sure she wanted to share her worries about her mother with Alma. But she proceeded cautiously, "Mother is in our little apartment downtown. She was diagnosed with stage two pneumonia some months back. That is how I got to work here. My days here are in payment for the quality treatment she received from Mr. Burnett's doctor."

Alma nodded. "And right now, how is she?" She pushed on. She wasn't going to stop until she got all the information she needed from Hope.

Hope exhaled loudly. This is it. "Well, I took my day off yesterday to visit her. On getting there, I met her lying helpless on the floor. She was breathing but very faintly. I revived her somehow, then managed to take her to the hospital. With the little money I had on me, I paid for a few tests to be run, and the doctor discovered that her illness had left the second stage to the third."

Alma wasn't surprised. Of course, she knew most of those things from the previous night. But she was moved to do something about it now. "Hope?" She called out.

"Yes, Miss Alma," Hope replied.

Although Hope didn't mention that she needed financial support to see her mother through the treatment, Alma knew she did. "Do you mind if I take care of your mother's bills?" She asked.

Hope was stunned. She had never seen such kindness come from someone without a condition or an exchange. She didn't realize a tear slipped down her cheeks. She tried to wipe it off, but she couldn't

control herself. Without restrain, she burst out in tears.

"I'd be forever grateful to you, Miss Alma, if you can do that for me."

Alma rushed to her side and pulled her into a hug. She could tell she wasn't used to receiving such favors from anyone.

"That's alright, Hope. It's doesn't take anything away from me,"

"Then why is Eric doing this?" Hope asked. Alma wanted to talk to her about the chemistry between her and Eric, but she didn't expect it to go this way.

"What do you mean?" Alma asked.

"Oh, Miss Alma. I'm sorry. I should not burden you with such nonsense talk," Hope stated and pulled herself out of Alma's embrace.

Alma smoothed her dress and said, "I don't mind this at all, Hope. Come on; you can talk to me."

Hope thought for some seconds before she answered. "He confuses me." She confessed.

Alma wasn't surprised. "Go on," she urged. She was loving every bit of this. Hope was in love with Eric and vice versa. They hadn't yet come to terms with it, but she was sure of it.

"From the day I met him at the bank, he was just a sad and angry man. To top it all, he hated me. With time, I could see him warm up to his children, and I began to feel things that I don't quite understand. Down to the night at the garden and at the piano," she paused and sighed as she reminisced about those moments they shared before Anna arrived. "It's all just nonsense. But you're brother's a great man. I can tell."

That was all Alma needed to hear. There was a ship that needed sailing, and if there was going to be a captain; she was the woman for the job.

Chapter Five



The conversation Alma had with Hope played through her head the entire day. She never imagined playing matchmaker for her older brother, but she didn't mind at all. If Eric was too blind to see what was in front of him or just ignoring it, she was going to make sure to cure him of his blindness.

"It's a surprise seeing you out here; you've always been more of an indoor person," Eric remarked.

"Things change, Brother, as do people," Alma replied.

"What brings you out here?" Eric asked. He wasn't letting it slide that easy.

"I've had a lot of things on my mind lately," she paused, "your situation with Hope, Mother, and Anna most surprisingly."

"Hope?" Eric queried in shock. "What does she have to do with any of this?"

Alma sighed. She didn't expect this to be easy at all. "I'm not blind, Eric; I see the way you look at her. I heard about the help you gave too. It's not like you to do something like that for a total stranger, Eric. What's going on with you? Talk to me." Alma cajoled.

Eric exhaled and sat on the bench near Alma. There was an internal battle within him warring over the decision to tell Alma anything or just keep on the way it was. But as it stood, he was tired of keeping his emotions tucked away. So a confession with Father Alma it was.

"I'm still trying to place what I feel towards her, dear sister," Eric explained. Alma could see the stress marks on his forehead. "I mean, some days I feel she's a breath of fresh air I need to survive than other days, there is mother and Anna. Anna has been a part of my life forever; since we were kids, you know? I don't think I want to throw away that relationship for something that might not stand the test of time. As you said, she's still a stranger."

Alma laughed, and Eric tilted his head to have a clearer view of her face. He was trying to figure out what she found amusing.

"She might be a stranger to us, Eric, but not to you. We both know that."

Eric pondered on what Alma said; there was no denying that she was absolutely right.

"I mean, you can see that the moment she stepped into the house, there's been this type of light that glows past all the darkness that has occupied this space since Elaine passed away. Alice and Morgan have

taken a keen liking to her as well," he got up and stood behind Alma. "I think I love her, Alma. But I see a lot of stop signs that deter my feelings. Does she feel the same way? Can she forgive me for my beastly attitude towards her?" Eric asked in a rush.

"There's only one way to find out." Alma moved closer to him and whispered a few words in his ear. "Tomorrow at dinner. Invite everyone." She declared. Then she jolted from the bench and exited the garden.

Eric stood with his head in his hands, considering his options. Hope was a great woman, no doubt, but was he ready to risk his relationship with his mother? With Anna?

He said a silent prayer for guidance. He really needed direction on which way to go from here.

"You'll never know until you try." He said confidently and exited the garden.

The next day came by pretty quickly for Hope. On the one hand, she regretted telling her problems to Alma, but after signing the papers for her mother's treatment at the hospital that morning, she felt nothing but gratitude towards her.

Surprisingly, Anna and Diane stayed out of her way throughout the day. There was no sign of a grumpy Eric around the mansion either. Not that it was his mood these days, but Hope did her best to stay clear of him as well. The only time she had to communicate with him was concerning Morgan.

Eric was going to run some errands and decided he wanted Morgan's company. So he asked Hope to prepare Morgan for the outing. That was not before he made small talk with her about how she had spent her night and all.

Hope was confused and had no idea where he was heading with the conversation, so she ended it as soon as possible.

When he noticed her discomfort, Eric's face held a crestfallen expression. He only wanted a decent conversation with her. Sadly, he had put her in the position to be somewhat afraid and vexed of him.

He requested she make chicken soup this evening with the new chickens Joanne just brought out from the pen. That was nothing new or unusual as chicken soup seemed to be Eric's favorite meal to eat lately.

Unfortunately, as she was about to joke about the chicken soup being his favorite meal, Anna walked into the room. It didn't bother Hope so much now that Eric just acknowledged her presence and didn't try to indulge in any further dialogue with her.

He left Anna and Hope in the room, which was very awkward because Eric and Anna didn't seem to be on good terms due to the

events of the previous morning. Secretly, Hope had to admit she was pleased by the new development. Eric was standing up for her. Perhaps he does have feelings for her after all?

Miss Joanne called all the staff into the kitchen two hours to dinner and told everyone to be present at seven sharp. It was funny to Hope because it looked like her dream was playing out in reality. Although it is Joanne instead of Diane inviting everyone to dinner.

Dinnertime took a while to arrive, especially for Eric more than anyone else. He was both anxious and eager at the same time.

Alma was there with him in the office a few hours before Joanne addressed the staff. He made an additional request that they put on their best clothes—another part of the instructions that amused Hope. Could this really be her dream playing out in reality?

Dinnertime arrived; everyone—both family and staff—was seated at the table. Well, everyone except Diane. She was still annoyed that Eric wasn't making any effort to get rid of Hope.

There was loud chatter in the room. Everyone was eager to hear the announcement Eric had to make. Joanne seemed to have an idea of what was going on but wouldn't spill.

With a tablespoon, Eric clinked the wine glass that was upturned beside him.

"Silence everyone," he requested; in a split second, if a pin dropped, there would have been an echo. Everyone went silent; even Morgan and Alice, who sat beside Hope, were quiet as mice. They seemed to catch on to things pretty quickly.

"I called this gathering this evening, but before then, can someone bless this dinner for us?" He asked and glanced at the two women by his side.

Technically, it was the one woman and one boy. Eric sat at the head of the table, Anna on his right side, Morgan on his left with Hope right beside him, while Alice sat on her opposite side.

Anna jumped on the opportunity. She strived to do everything possible to ensure Eric was no longer angry with her.

"Our Father in heaven, we dedicate this meal to you. Forgive our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Amen."

Everyone chorused "Amen" in response.

"Was that the Lord's prayer?" Morgan innocently asked. Eric immediately understood that he was referring to the part of forgiveness she added in the blessing.

Eric also felt she was relating that part of the blessing to him. Which didn't matter; he had forgiven her and wouldn't hold it against her.

He reached out and placed his right hand on her open palm.

"Thank you, Anna," he said. She beamed with the brightest smile he hadn't seen in a while. It made him question what he was about to do a bit more. But he was pushing on with it anyway.

"It has been a rollercoaster ride since I lost my late wife, Elaine. May she rest in peace."

"Not many were around during that time to see how it all materialized. But Charles and Joanne here can attest that I was one broken man. I didn't see a reason to continue living. Thankfully that has changed now."

Joanne smiled. She had been waiting for the day the Eric she knew would come around again. She wished Miriam was here to witness this day.

As if on cue, there was a knock on the door, and Joanne positioned to get up to open it, but Charles beat her to it. "I'll get it. You rest, Miss Joanne," he said and walked out to the front door.

Eric wanted to get done with his speech as soon as possible with few delays. He tapped with his fingers on the table as he waited for Charles to return.

"Good evening everyone!" Miriam announced as she walked into the dining room. Charles followed behind her.

Morgan and Alice looked happy to see her too. Everyone smiled with delight to see her; everyone except Anna said their greetings to her before Eric continued.

"Welcome, Miriam. It's glad to see that you honored my invitation. So good to see you." Eric said with a slight bow.

"Nonsense, Mr. Burnett. It's my pleasure," Miriam replied and winked. Eric smiled in response.

"I'm glad Miriam is here now. Like I was saying before the interruption, things were not always like this after my late wife passed away. Only a few were there to witness those days; fortunately, Miriam was among them. I'm most grateful to her because she was there to hold my children when I was incapable."

Everywhere became silent again as Eric spoke.

"Thankfully, due to the efforts of a few people here and there, I've been able to recover my previous self. I'm here, first of all, to say thank you to everyone who stood by when I wasn't the best version of me," Eric said as he placed his glass on the table.

He picked up a bottle of wine; popped the cork. It suddenly went flying across the room; Morgan and Alice clapped ecstatically. Everyone at the table joined in on the laughter.

"Turn your glasses; we're going to make a toast to many things tonight," he announced. Everyone did as he said.

"I can help you with that, Eric," Anna insisted, attracting attention to herself.

"That alright, Anna, I can do this myself," Eric said and smiled at her.

He struggled with the other bottles and eventually asked Charles to help, which caused even more hearty laughter to wave around the table.

When everyone had their glasses filled, he came back to the head of the table and stood behind his chair. By this time, Hope and Morgan had exchanged seats because she was trying to stop him from reaching for the wine glass.

"Before anything else, I'd love to say thank you to an exceptional person seated here with us today. I regained myself the day you walked through those doors. I'm so grateful for that." Everyone looked at Anna, beaming with joy. Joanne and Miriam smiled at Hope while Hope's face held a fake smile. "You showed me what love felt like again, and I relish every second I get to spend with you," he declared.

He inserted his hand into the pocket of his trousers and pulled out a ring box. Everyone in the room gasped. From the box, they could tell that it was going to be an expensive one—nothing less than 24 karats.

As he lifted his head, he met the cold eyes of Diane piercing the side of his face from the stairway, daring him to do what he was about to. 'Ready or not, here I go, Mother,' he thought. He dropped to one knee with the opened box.

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